

*Landmarks on the Road to Reconciliation*

Acts 9:1-11

It's good to see you again. I am just back from four weeks of time away. Thanks to you and this pandemic, I had the gift of living and working and vacationing for a month near Yosemite, where I did all the things that renew my soul and my energy—hiking and reading and cooking. It was great. While I was gone, you got to experience the extraordinary gifts of our new Pastor Jeremy, and I was reminded again of how grateful I am for the team of pastors and directors on the staff of this church. I've missed you, but I know you were in good hands, held by people who love you the way I love you.

My hiking partner this last month was my sister Kirsti. We've done walking and hiking vacations together for years, and over those trips we've acquired a million stories of getting lost somewhere. Usually that happens because I can't read a map. I have no idea where I was supposed to learn this skill, but clearly I was absent the day it was being taught. I stand in a city with a map in my hands and I have to turn it around and around before I figure out whether I'm facing the right direction. 'Use the GPS on your phone' you might say, but I have the same trouble orienting myself. When I stay in a hotel and come out of my room and try to head toward the elevator, I turn the wrong way about 80% of the time, even though that is statistically improbable. Really. It's embarrassing.

But what I realized on our hikes in Yosemite Park this year is that while I can't read a map, what I can do is follow a path. I'm actually pretty good at finding the markers that signal that someone has walked this way before, and often that—someone else's footsteps—are all you need to find the way. Lucky for me and my spiritual life that Jesus' call to his disciples was "Follow me," not "Go northwest."

The road I want to be on in these days, the road I hope we might all be on together, is toward racial reconciliation. I mean by that the commitment to be in relationship with people whose experience of life is different from my own, and whose stories I need to hear and understand before I even try to imagine what they need—or how I might learn from them. I mean by that the long-term work it will take to take apart—dismantle—the voting and education and financial and criminal justice systems that still make this country a place where race privileges some people and disadvantages others. I mean the internal change of heart—what we might call transformation and the early Church called *metanoia*—that will open our eyes to see others' needs as clearly and tenderly as we see our own. I mean knowing—really knowing—that my life—our lives—cannot be whole until everyone flourishes.

I will tell you that my thinking and praying and reflecting over the last month kept pointing me, again and again, toward the work of racial justice. It was one of those rare months when I had lots of time and space and silence to listen, I kept hearing a voice inside of me saying that this is the path that people of faith and goodwill—followers of Jesus—are meant to be on in this time.

Cornel West once said, "*Justice is what love looks like in public.*" Is racial justice the only pressing issue before us, or the only place where love and healing are required? No—of course not. But maybe—I'm not sure, but maybe—the unrest, the dis-ease, that has surfaced since George Floyd's death in May is the purpose of love among us right now. The place God is

pointing toward and saying, ‘Go here. This is where you will find me.’ The path on which we will grow to be more human, more alive. Even now. Even in this time when we are separated from one another and a little bit lost and lonely because of a pandemic. Maybe *especially* now, when we are reminded of how much we need one another, and how far we are from flourishing.

And I think there’s a path in front of us, with some markers to show us the way.

This week and next week, I want to tell you two stories from the Book of Acts, the New Testament story of the earliest Christians, people who were figuring out what it meant to follow Jesus when he was no longer with them. Both stories are about justice issues. Both are about people who experienced something that changed them, and who then worked to make change in their communities, and in systems that seemed absolutely unchangeable. Both are about people who, all along, were trying to do the right thing, just like you and me.

It’s the remarkable similarity between these two stories that caught my attention. As you hear them, this Sunday and next, listen for the markers that will point to the next turn on the path.

The story Jeremy read today is what is usually called ‘the conversion of Saul.’ After this story, Saul is always referred to in the Bible as ‘Paul’. Some people have said it’s because his conversion was so profound that his whole identity changed. More scholars would say, I think, that Saul is the Jewish version of his name and Paul is the Greek version of the same name. Whatever the reason for two names, this is the story of the man who became the founder of first Christian communities all across the Roman Empire in the first century after Jesus. He’s the writer of much of the New Testament. The follower of Jesus who is largely responsible for transforming Christianity, opening the Church to people who had not been born Jewish, and so had always been excluded from the religion of Jesus.

But he didn’t start out like that. Saul was a Jew. He *was* born into the same religion as Jesus. He was so loyal to his tradition, that he felt a personal responsibility for protecting it from getting whittled away by change. Saul was alive when Jesus came along and started talking to people about things like bending the no-work-on-the-Sabbath rules, touching things and people that every Jew knew God had declared unclean, off-limits. Jesus was messing with practices, traditions, that were right at the center of what it meant to be faithful to God. And now his followers were doing the same thing.

So Saul went to work to protect his people’s way of life. If that meant incarcerating people who violated the religious order, or closing down places where they were plotting disruption—well, that’s just what they needed to do. And Saul did it. Empowered by both his personal passion and a position of authority, Saul tormented the people who were corrupting the faith, drove them out of their homes and their worship places. Saul wasn’t a bad man; he was an exceedingly good man, passionate about his beliefs, what he *knew* was right and good and the way God intended things to be. The way they had always been before.

And then one day, while he was on his way to do more of what he was sure was God’s work, suddenly, the writer of Acts says, a light from heaven came down on Saul, came all around him. He fell on the ground, and then he heard a voice asking, “Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?”

“Who are you?” Saul asked the voice.

“I am Jesus,” came the answer. “I’m the one you’re harassing when you hurt these people.”

This is the part of the story where I wish we had little thought bubbles coming up over the characters' heads. Because I imagine Saul had at least a moment when he thought 'I'm not harassing you. Why are your people wrecking our religion?' (It doesn't say that.)

What the story does tell us is that Saul was stunned by this vision—thrown to the ground. That's a metaphor. It tells us he lost the footing beneath him, that he could not find again the ground he had been standing solidly on until just a minute before. Some modern commentators have called Saul's experience a *catalytic event*—a sudden explosion of tension that pushed him out of his comfort zone. Out of that bubble he'd been living in comfortably, where he knew exactly what was right and wrong, where he couldn't even hear anyone who might have tried to tell him that what he was holding onto so tightly was the wrong thing.

It's important to notice in this story that Paul's catalytic event was not a moment of clarity. A new way did not open up immediately in front of him. He had no vision at that moment about what to do next. We'll talk about this more next week, but already, just a few verses further in the story, we hear that when Saul's companions picked him up from the ground, they realized that he'd been blinded. He couldn't see anything...for days. Another metaphor: when our worlds get shaken up, what we feel isn't relief; it's confusion and angst. Uncertainty. Loss.

Here's what I want to ask you to think with me in this next week, and especially as we begin our new August small groups: Do you think we might be, right now, standing at a marker on the path that says 'Catalytic Event'? We've been hit, almost literally, by a wave that has thrown us off our feet, out of our routines, apart from our stable communities. Smack in the middle of our disorientation, we have heard—in the death of a man who cried 'I can't breathe' and in outraged protests all over this country--the voice of our neighbor, asking, 'Why are you harassing me?'

Is this the voice of Jesus?

Is it possible that there is, right now, a light from heaven shining invisibly around us, telling us that this is a moment for our transformation?